The Treaty of Versailles.

The fighting in the First World War came to an end on 11 November 1918. The news meant different things to different people.

Now that the fighting had stopped, it was up to the politicians to work out a lasting peace. The representatives of the victors met at Versailles, near Paris. They worked out terms which would be presented to the defeated powers to sign. This took them well into 1919. The representatives in Versailles had many points to consider.

THE VERSAILLES PEACEMAKERS.

Wilson, USA.

Woodrow Wilson, the American President, was an idealist who wanted to build a better, safer world out of the war. When he led the USA into war in 1917, he did so on the basis of his 'Fourteen Points'. He had put these forward in the hope that, if they were accepted, they would prevent another war from ever taking place.

Woodrow Wilson now hoped that these Fourteen Points would be the basis of the treaty. Notice that there is no mention of punishing Germany in them. All fourteen of the points were meant to remove any possible disagreement which might lead to war in the way that the Sarajevo incident had done in 1914.

Clemenceau, France.

Clemenceau was an old man who had seen his country invaded by Germany in 1870 and again in 1914. Since then he had seen his country shattered by four years of war. Clemenceau was now determined on revenge. His main aim was to weaken Germany so that it could never attack France again and to gain compensation for all the damage suffered by France. Wilson's ideals had no appeal for him.

Lloyd George, Britain.

Lloyd George saw the danger in punishing Germany too severely.

However, he had just won an election in Britain in which he had gained votes by promising to make Germany pay, even to hang the Kaiser.

He also disagreed with point 2 of Wilson's Fourteen Points. He thought that Britain's safety depended on controlling the seas.

THE FOURTEEN POINTS.

There should be no secret treaties; all international agreements should be open.

The seas were to be free to all countries at all times.

Customs barriers between countries should be removed.

Armaments should be reduced.

The wishes of the people in colonies should be taken into account when settling colonial claims.

German forces must leave Russia.

Belgium should be independent.

Alsace-Lorraine should be returned to France.

Italy's frontier should be adjusted to avoid quarrels with Austria.

There should be self-determination for the peoples of Eastern Europe. This meant that the different nationalities should be allowed to govern themselves in independent countries.

Serbia should be given a coastline.

There should be self-determination for the peoples of the Turkish empire.

Poland should become independent from Russia and be given a coastline.

An international organisation to settle all disputes between countries should be set up, to be called the League of Nations.

Making peace.

Clearly, there was going to be some disagreement among the four countries concerned. None of them got everything they wanted. The German Army had surrendered on the basis of fair treatment under the 14 Points. But Wilson had to give way to the others in order to keep their support for the idea which was most important to him: point 14, the setting up of the League of Nations. This point was written into the treaty. Several other points from the fourteen were accepted but only when it suited Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Orlando.

The peacemakers did not have much time to consider the problem. They had to act quickly, for Europe was in chaos:

A terrible flu epidemic was killing more people, already weak from food shortages, than the whole war had done.

In Germany the Kaiser had abdicated and fled to Holland. A new, democratically elected republic was set up. The new German republic hoped for reasonable terms from the treaty.

Following the example of the Russian Revolution in 1917 Communists tried to seize power in parts of Germany and Hungary.

In Eastern Europe some people had taken the law into their own hands and set up their own states before the treaty gave them the right.

Lastly, the conference met near Paris, in the heart of a country badly hit by four years of war. The peacemakers could not get away from feelings of revenge: they might have done so more easily if they had met on neutral ground.

A DICTATED PEACE .

Note that there was no representative from Russia, the former ally of Britain and France. There was no one present from the defeated countries: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria. It was not a negotiated peace.

In the light of these facts and knowing the aims of the main peacemakers, judge for yourself the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.

The Terms of the treaty.

Territory.

Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France. (It had been seized from France by Germany after the war of 1870.)

The Saar (part of Germany, with an important coalfield) was taken from Germany and given to France for fifteen years. At the end of this time, a vote was to be taken among the people of the Saar to decide which country they wanted to belong.

The left bank of the Rhine in Germany was to be occupied by the Allies. A strip 50 km wide on the right bank was to be demilitarized – that is, no forts, army bases, weapons or soldiers were to be allowed inside it.

Poland was made an independent country It was given a 'corridor' to the Baltic Sea. This 'Polish Corridor' cut off East Prussia from the rest of Germany.

Danzig, a city with both Polish and German citizens, was made a 'free city' and placed under international rule.

Finland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, formerly parts of Russia, were made independent countries.

Czechoslovakia, formerly part of Austria-Hungary, was made an independent state.

Austria and Hungary became two separate countries.

A new independent country, Yugoslavia, was created out of a much enlarged Serbia.

Italy was given South Tyrol and Istria.

Romania, Greece, Belgium and Denmark, all received small pieces of land from the defeated countries.

Colonies.

Germany and Turkey had all their former colonies taken away from them. They were given to other countries as mandates. This meant that the countries receiving them had to agree to lead them, eventually, to independence. The League of Nations was to make sure that the territories under mandate were properly looked after.

The German empire

Tanganyika was given to Britain, the Cameroons to France, South-West Africa to South Africa and the Pacific islands to Japan.

The Turkish empire

Palestine, Jordan and Iraq were given to Britain; Syria and Lebanon to France.

Arms.

The German army was to be cut down to 100,000 men.

All wartime guns and weapons were to be melted down as scrap metal.

The German navy was to be cut down to 36 ships. Germany was not allowed to have any submarines in future.

Germany was not allowed to have an air force.

Germany was forbidden ever to make an alliance with Austria again.

Blame.

By article 231 of the treaty, Germany had to accept total blame for the war.

Reparations.

Because Germany was held to blame for the war, it was decided that it should pay reparations to the Allies to compensate them for their losses. This was alter fixed at £6,600 million.

HOW DID GERMANY REACT TO THE TREATY?

The German fleet had been handed over to the British, who anchored the battleships at their naval base at Scapa Flow in the Shetlands. When the terms of the treaty were announced, the German crews deliberately scuttled (destroyed) their ships.

The German people and their government were angry and bitter about the terms of the treaty. In land, people and assets they lost the following: 13% of their land, 12% of their people, 10% of their coal, 48 % of their iron, 15% of their agricultural production and 10% of their manufacturing industries. The loss of their armed forces deeply wounded their national pride. The victorious countries did not cut down their armed forces to anywhere near the same levels.

The 'war guilt' clause hurt most of all. Even if the German government of 1914 had been solely to blame for the war (which is doubtful), why punish a new government trying to replace the Kaiser's rule with democratic government? A mood of bitter resentment grew in Germany which later made people eager to listen to Hitler's criticisms of the treaty. However, the German army could not fight any longer, the people were starving and the government knew they had no choice: they had to sign the treaty.

CRITICISMS OF THE TREATY.

Apart from its effect on Germany, the treaty has been criticised for many reasons. Most of all, it failed to keep the peace, for only 20 years later world war broke out again. The treaty ignored some minority groups and set up small, weak countries from others. Both these actions made Europe less stable. The old Austria-Hungary was split up according, where possible, to the wishes of its many peoples. But it had been built up as a single economic unit. Now road, rail and river links were broken and industries cut off from their suppliers or their markets. This contributed to the economic weaknesses of the new countries. Some of these, like Czechoslovakia, had large minorities of other peoples inside their borders.

Wilson's aim of self-determination (point 10 of the Fourteen Points) was not applied to all national minority groups equally. German minorities in particular were ignored: in 1919, there were three and a half million Germans in Czechoslovakia, one million Germans in Poland and half a million German-speaking Austrians in Yugoslavia and Italy. Self-determination did not seem to apply to the peoples who were on the wrong side at the end of the war. Some new countries had little experience of democracy and soon fell under the rule of dictators. Many were too small and weak to resist Hitler in 1940–1941 or to resist the USSR in 1945.

On the other hand, the tangle of national minorities was really an impossible problem for the peacemakers to solve. Of the countries set up in 1919 only Finland has had uninterrupted independence since then. Austria was annexed by Hitler from 1938 to 1945.

National status, granted in 1919, was an important factor in the resistance of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia to being absorbed into the Soviet Empire from 1945 to 1989.

In Yugoslavia, independence lasted right through from 1919 to 1990, but then hostility between national minorities burst out in a terrible civil war and the country fell apart. National differences also led to the split up of Czechoslovakia in 1990.